



Moving S. Mtn. Freeway south of Pecos faces tribal opposition

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In the 1980s and 1990s when the 101 and 202 were designed and built, I helped negotiate with the Arizona Department of Transportation, Maricopa Association of Governments, and citizens groups to assure there were adequate buffer zones, minimal disruption to communities, and environmental protections, and to assure that unsightly views of these freeways were not imposed on neighborhoods. While it was imperative these freeways were built, careful planning and negotiations allowed them to be constructed with minimal negative impact on the communities they traversed.

Today we recognize how critical these arteries are to mobility in the East Valley, and how impossible life would be without them.

Based on my experiences with the 101 and 202 it is extremely difficult for me to envision circumstances under which a freeway with the current Pecos Road alignment could be built. Far too much development of homes and businesses has been allowed to take place in the proposed path of the freeway.

Despite this development, however, there have been two citizen votes and a planning process underway for a Pecos Road alignment. As a result of this, I've been working to minimize the adverse impacts to neighborhoods in the path of the proposed alignment. I've held neighborhood meetings to address the concerns of citizens, and have worked closely with ADOT, MAG, and Maricopa County to assess the potential impacts on affected neighborhoods.

At the request of Ahwatukee Village planning committee members I had weather stations installed at 40th Street and 24th Street for several months to help assess environmental impacts by measuring local wind patterns and weather conditions. I've also brought freeway activists into meetings with all the planning entities to allow more extensive issue development.

If we are at all interested in protecting our neighborhoods in the process of designing and constructing a freeway, it is incumbent upon us to make every effort to move the freeway alignment south where there is a vast amount of open land. This option would be far preferable to tearing through neighborhood after neighborhood and destroying hundreds of homes, churches and businesses.

To that end I have attempted to work with leaders of the Gila River Indian Tribe, encouraging them to build the freeway on their land. I have made several trips to the GRIC headquarters in Sacaton to speak with tribal officials and their transportation planners. Tribal leaders have attended my neighborhood meetings to further our discussions.

Meetings with the lawyer for the Gila River Indian Tribe has helped me to understand the internal challenges we face in order to gain tribal acceptance of the freeway. As a result of these efforts I've come to realize that tribal resistance to the freeway is cultural and deep-seated.

There are, however, individual tribal leaders who recognize the extraordinary economic benefits of this freeway to their community and the employment opportunities it would offer their members. Although there are differences of opinion on this, I believe we can capitalize on the energy of these leaders and continue working toward moving the freeway south onto tribal land.

Experience has shown me there are ways to build freeways without damaging neighborhoods, but it takes enormous cooperative efforts to do so. I am actively working with ADOT, MAG, Maricopa County, local cities, Transportation Board members, Gila River tribal leaders, and neighborhood citizen groups to assure we preserve the quality of life and continued economic success our communities currently enjoy, while simultaneously advancing the development of a freeway on Indian land.

One thing is certain. The need for a freeway in the East Valley is overwhelmingly evident, and every effort must be made to accomplish this under conditions that favor the preservation of our communities.

I thank *The Arizona Republic* for forwarding this question.

State Sen. John Huppenthal, R-Chandler, represents District 20.